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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2542
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 5077
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 9126
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SUBJECT: BHUTAN INVITES NEPALESE FM TO THIMPHU TO DISCUSS

REFUGEES

REF: KATHMANDU 745

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt, Reason 1.5 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: Bhutanese Ambassador Tshering told PolCouns and PolOff on March 30 that the RGOB invited Nepalese Foreign Minister Pandey to Thimphu to expedite a solution to the refugee problem. In a welcome reversal of his previous statements to us, Tshering asserted that the RGOB position on the refugees "is very clear, with no ambiguity" and that his government would stand by all agreements. He told us that the RGOB's latest letter to Foreign Minister Pandey reaffirmed that Bhutan would abide by the agreed-upon repatriation process and asked that a two member team from Bhutan be allowed to visit the Khudunabari Camp for that purpose. Tshering suggested that Nepal was not truly in favor of finding a solution to the problem, citing Kathmandu's refusal to allow UNHCR to conduct re-registration at the camps and its unwillingness to provide exit permits for vulnerable refugees. Tshering's message is a reiteration of Bhutan's tried and true response to the refugee problem, but the meeting between FMs Wangchuk and Pandey in Thimphu could yield detailed Bhutanese terms and conditions for return. If so, progress will have been made. End Summary.

Proposed Meeting of Foreign Ministers in Thimphu

12. (C) Tshering told us that during the latest phone call between FMs Wangchuk and Pandey, FM Wangchuk invited his counterpart to Thimphu to expedite a resolution of the refugee issue. Tshering reported that Wangchuk reaffirmed Bhutan's commitment to the agreements already made, expressed its willingness to continue the bilateral process, and expressed its readiness to repatriate Category 1 and 4

refugees. The letter from FM Wangchuk outlined these points as well as requesting that a two-person team from Bhutan be allowed to visit Khudunabari to discuss repatriation with camp residents, Tshering remarked. (Note: PolCouns requested a paper containing the details of the letter, which Tshering indicated he would provide. End Note.) Tshering indicated that Bhutan was willing to set a date by which the Category 1 and 4 refugees would be able to return to Bhutan. He noted that the RGOB would then be open to finding solutions for category 2 refugees.

Pointing a Finger at Nepal

¶3. (C) Tshering stated that "Pandey's response was not very positive," and there is a sense in Thimphu that Nepal is "disinterested" in resolving the problem. He highlighted Nepal's unwillingness to allow UNHCR to conduct re-registration of the camps and its refusal to give exit permits to vulnerable refugees as examples of Kathmandu's intransigence. "The letter we received from Pandey contained a different message than what was discussed in Dhaka," Tshering also claimed. He concluded that the RGOB has not

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received a response to FM Wangchuk's letter or invitation to meet on the subject in Thimphu.

Comment: The Back and Forth Continues

¶4. (C) Tshering's message reiterating Bhutanese commitment to the repatriation process reflected a welcome reversal of his stance. RGOB policy is designed to minimize the number

NEW DELHI 00002167 002 OF 002

of refugees they must eventually take back and it is clear Bhutan is in no great hurry to start repatriations. However, with the USG having little leverage to press the RGOB into action, we suggest continued support for the bilateral process, including direct appeals to King Wangchuck to resolve the problem and encouraging the meeting between Foreign Ministers in Thimphu. Some good may yet come of such a meeting.

¶5. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>
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